

## Youth, Physicality and Sporting Experience. Italian Pedagogical Research Contribution

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### 1. *Young people betwixt “nihilism” and “authenticity”*

Youth and physicality are two “hemispheres” that require deep analysis (especially pedagogical) with regard to individuals constantly seeking a comparison between the specificity of these two existential figures which have a profound impact on the identity-building process despite being metamorphic.

Also found on this horizon is the relationship young people have with their bodies, representing the barycentre of subjects who in their *embodiment* negatively experience some of their most significant difficulties (just think of the two emblematic and constantly rising cases of anorexia and bulimia). In fact, what is lost in the “youthful imagination” and the actual “body de-education” process is the spiritual construction of the body, its authenticity, and its existence as a plural and open identification nucleus. In today’s society young people are moving simultaneously along two different tracks: one, *centrifugal*, that pushes them to the outer edge of the same society that has protracted their adolescent dimension, procrastinating their commitment towards work, independence, and starting a family, and that places them outside the decision-making nuclei (just think of politics, professions, cultural institutions, etc.); the other, *centripetal*, that fixes them in the middle of the collective imagination, increasingly more inspired by youthful values and models, based on young-style languages and mannerisms (just think of the communication forms, apparel, sports, lifestyles, etc.).

This is the era of the “frustration” of being young (characterised by restlessness, indecision, impatience, discontinuity), but also of the “myth of youth” (with its impetus of enthusiasm, creativity, commitment and idealism). The psycho-existential condition of young people today is connoted by a contradictory identity that is just as social as it is conscience-based. A contradiction consumed between “nihilism” and “authenticity”, between the abandonment of what is real (fitting in without purpose, playing by ear day after day, with increasingly evident dispersion), and the desire to make sense of self, of life, of the world, and of religion (often with an attitude of refuge, radicalism and participation).

### 2. *Physicality and youth*

It is here, in this aporia between “nihilism” and the search for “authenticity”, that the relationship, equally difficult, that young people have with their bodies, must be slotted. The body is ideologised by the *media*, by advertising and by current customs, making it seem increasingly more like an identity, turning it into an authentic fetish. In fact, a young person’s body often becomes an object of worship, its physical nature gets reduced, it is made up of text signals (erotic, of belonging, encoded), and standardised, with the subsequent loss of the subject-individual-person’s “own body”.

Tattooing, *piercing*, *dreadlocks* and *branding*, exaggerated makeup, extreme gestures, alcohol abuse, the use of narcotics, strict diets and the mirror syndrome all represent the results of socially coercive models and/or those imposed by the media that influence the condition of today’s young people. Principles that in many cases turn into regulatory constraints (from that of appearing to that of exhibiting oneself, from that of performing to that of belonging), which make young people’s bodies, and young people themselves “fit a certain size”, producing effects that are at least tendentially devastating. The results of this standardisation process are multiple, however they all coalesce around the numbing of the body, the univocal history of its experience, the loss of its wealth, its pluralism and its complexity.

In addition, the spiritual/value-based dimension is strongly downgraded and in a certain sense eliminated, precisely by an ephemeral use of the body: just think of *sexual relationships* (very often experienced precociously, in a consumer-orientated and uninhibited manner, published on mobile phones and internet, exploited in order to respond to the power sirens and climb the social ladder) and the *technical aspect* (which in the so-called *post-human* mode makes the body correctable, integrable, cloneable and ideologically immortal).

If the body is instead lived authentically, it touches other planes that constantly fluctuate between balance and tension: in this way the body fits into a life project, it is moulded by experience, it becomes personal, it conquers *in itinere*, but even more importantly, it is not given *ab extra*.

### **3. The strategic role of sport**

Few other modern-day phenomena are as “cumbersome” as sport: the prince of entertainment of the mass society – as confirmed by its focal position in TV shows and its commercial significance – is at one and the same time an expressive event, a lifestyle, a behavioural mode, a communications vehicle, an ideological expression, a new mythology, a popular passion, an industrial principle, and a technological laboratory, etc. Apart from all its possible definitions, in many ways sport still remains a complex, contradictory, multidimensional, and interdisciplinary manifestation of our social universe.

The era of planetary television and media produces an aggressive declination of “spectacular” sport, intended as the main manifestation of the global media universe (just think of the impact on the public and the impressive commercial circuit associated with major sporting events such as the Olympics and the world football cup, with their wide range of offers targeting specific markets and sections of the public). That is not to say that sports entertainment is an event of post-modernity. Irrespective of whether competitive or otherwise, sporting events have always possessed an extraordinary communicative potential and a huge capacity to entertain. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that in modern-day society, sport triggers dynamics capable of radically changing cultures and associative experiences. These have recently turned into authentic industries with medium to large-sized turnovers and volumes of business transactions, with the concurrent activation of unregimented supporters in a sort of market of symbols and interests.

Thus spectacular sport has conditioned the same consecrated rules of the game itself, nearly always in order to make sporting disciplines more “TV-transmittable” and more “commercial” despite the fact that their rules have undergone very few variations over the years. Sport can (also) be considered as a means of communication in/of society, with a series of “lights” and “shadows” that are expressed precisely in the competition. Competitive sport was originally intended as a positive event that conveys its values through authentic communication. Today, with the transition of competition to entertainment, sport is loaded with tribal symbols, tensions and violence. A process that has given rise to the loss of its real and specific communicative/educative value. This too, must be subjected to the scrutiny of a critical reading, especially in terms of communication: undoubtedly, the technicality, the logic of the record, the primacy and the competition all offer a vision of sport that is more functional for the market than for training, and in this way the unity between competition, game and community is also lost.

Starting from this unfavourable circumstance to pedagogically consider the meaning/value of the competition, we must not forget the *lectio* of Pierre de Coubertin, which is still extremely pertinent today. That is, we must recover the *educational value* of sport, guiding and conveying it through the school, the family, sports associations, the organisation of free time, olympism, etc. In other words, instead of turning sport into a spectacle, we must re-endow it with its educational function not only at the level of the individual athlete, but also at the level of society, through a collective playful, festive and communicative dimension, capable of uniting (as Italian pedagogical research is trying to do) the sports culture with the educational processes.

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